

MARAUDERS OF THE AZURE MAIN (PART TWO)

Andrew Wright

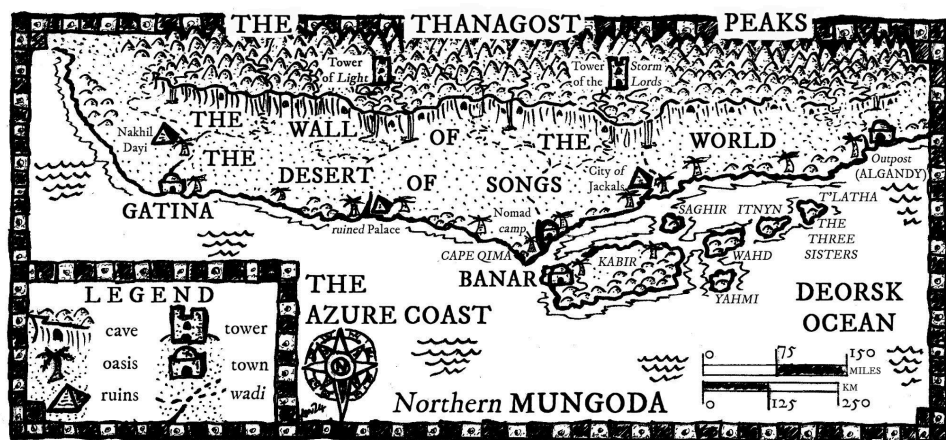
Sir,

This is my second scroll to you concerning our recent expedition to **the Azure Coast**. After accumulating intelligence about the port of **Gatina** and surrounds, we ventured into the **hinterland**. A guide had promised us a meeting at one of the interior **oases**, where **nomadic tribes gather and trade**. Nearby were also **ruins of some antiquity** so it seemed prudent to wander outside Gatina and collect **further information**, as well as offer **general commentary on the landscape itself**.

The character of the terrain along the Azure Coast is remarkably uniform in appearance. An outer reef of **coral atolls and islets** shield the inner coastline from the waves of the Deorsk Ocean. This inner coastline is largely long, **empty strands of sand and shingle**, interspersed with **muddy mangrove enclaves**, typically in the vicinity of where **a seasonal creek or wadi** debouches into the sea, often in **a series of tidal lagoons**.

Beyond the coast, the immediate terrain alternates between **groves of palms and tamarisk** trees, usually following the banks of creeks; **flat harsh scrubby expanses** of coarse gravel and yellow sand; and **crystalline salt pans**, brilliant white in hue and intensity. Beyond this, **the Desert of Songs** begins proper, a sea of wave-like dunes of orange sand stretching all the way to the **Wall of the World**. This is apparently a massive cliff-like escarpment, leading to an enormous range of mountains called the **Thanagost Peaks**, that separate arid northern Mungoda from the tropical southern lands. All of these features are again depicted by the **attached map** of helmswoman Ekaterina Gaskillios, who also is fluent in **Nascérine**.

The **oasis**, called **Nakhil Dayi**¹, was a ragged glade of date palms and not too far inland, based around several wells sunk into the rocky, coraline terrain. **Camels** were tethered in low-walled compounds, but the **nomads**² had all pitched **large stitched-hide tents**, arranged around **communal camp-fires**, in which to sleep. A slight distance apart from the oasis was a **series of ruined stoneworks** of classical disposition. **No one ventured into the ruins at night**, unless they had ingested lotus leaves³, and only a few brave souls perched on the stones during the day.



There were intriguing things available at the **oasis market**. Clumps of **wild honey**, musty and impure, but with an intoxicating flavour all the same, chunks of plant resin and gum – **different kinds of incense** in its purest form, heady to ingest. **Pelts** of leopard, hyena and desert wolf, and even sometimes that of the great black-maned lion, **rhinoceros-horn daggers**, ostrich feathers, **shagreen**-hilted scimitars and other products of the sea, such as **pearls and coral**.

There was also **gold**. Not a lot, but **enough to dream**; **raw nuggets** hacked from the earth, dull and waiting to be worked. **Polished trinkets** and ornaments from some **ancient tomb** or another, looking for buyers of

¹ “Uncle’s Palm”. Whose uncle and which palm tree we could not ascertain.

² **Nascerine** was spoken by some nomads but not all.

³ Readily available. There is a **strong market** among the nomads for **quality lotus**.

antiquities. Sources indicate the **gold nuggets** originate much further into the hinterland, along the eastern mountains, at mines owned by a nation called **Tochel**⁴, while the **tomb goods** are plundered from various sites within the desert, belonging to an ancient Kaikuhuruan supplicant-state called **Anku**⁵.

The **perils** of the **Desert of Songs** are **manifold** and well-known at this time, but to recount number plentiful physical hardships of **water** requirements and surviving **arid** conditions. Also, desert **vipers** are to be feared as well as the **demons** known as **Pazuzu**. **Wolves** and **panthers** stalk the dunes, as do **vultures**, **jackals**, and **hyenas** to pilfer all their kills. Worse, **Giant Scorpions** have been known to erupt from the sand and slaughter camels, while **Grave Gaunts** drift out from hidden caves among the Wall of the World, to terrorize those that slumber among the dunes of the Desert of Songs.

Sir, despite this, **I recommend a further investment**. There is **something here, lurking** just **beneath the sands**, a potential harvest of who-knows-what, waiting to be **exploited**. Do not think me superstitious, better, consider me prescient. I have a feeling, **a hunch**⁶, an intuition that further exploration of this area may prove more **profitable**. But more of that in time. First, we must venture to the other major port of the Azure Coast, the settlement of Banar!

Your trusted and esteemed colleague,

Kanthos Viliades

Captain and Attaché of the *Wanderer's Regret*

⁴ Apparently an Empire of some sort!

⁵ They worshipped the fire-god Katak and spread north across the mountains.

⁶ I promise this will not be another episode to rival what happened in the Stranded Isles!

The AZURE COAST

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